Report of the Committee on Romanism and
Infidelity – First Part, embracing the
subject of Infidelity
Sep – 1837

To ascertain the present state & extent of Infidelity in the Christian world, is a task which it is impossible to perform, with any great degree of accuracy. The great outlines of the picture may be delineated, but the finer shades must be left to the reflexion & experience of individuals — Perhaps on no subject embraced within the range of our investigation as a society of Enquiry, is there so great a barrenness of facts — The statistics of infidelity are in the last degree meagre & imperfect. This results in part, doubtless from the fact that no very strenuous efforts have been made to take the guage & dimensions of this religion of Nature or rather this negation of all religion. In part also from the nature of Infidelity — It is inhaerently selfish & solitary. Man is his own centre of action — affection & sympathy. There are no native tendencies outward which would impel the infidel to associate in organised bodies, so as to assume a distinctive character before the world. Their principles annihilate that confidence in character, which is necessary to the integrity & permanence of all organised societies. The pressure of external circumstances may indeed bind them together for a time & a communion of opinion & feeling may temporarily create a sympathy of but the moment the bands from without are broken, their original repellancies of character show themselves & like bodies electrified in the same way, they fly asunder - A desire of propagating their opinions, which has usually been the ostensible motive for their organisation, whether it springs from the desire of power or the pressure of popular odium occasioned by the prevalence of opposite sentiments, is in most cases insufficient to sustain any great or long protracted effort. Besides their religion does not demand~~s~~ ~~no~~ publicity of sentiment or union of heart - It often luxuriates in concealment - The light by revealing its loathsome deformity withers its vigor. Hence it is that there are many in almost every Christian community where the tide of public opinion sets runs against them who conceal under the mask of an external decency or a deceptive subscription to articles they abhor, the foul features of their belief - The page of history may possibly be stained with the blood of an infidel martyr, but with that of a martyr to infidelity never - Fully to take the guage of infidelity is therefore beyond our power. It is only when the confidence of numbers has emboldened it to uncover to the world the enormous mass of darkness & putrefaction which it breeds & in which it reveals, that it is possible to ascertain its full entire extent -

It will perhaps aid us in forming a just estimate of the present state of infidelity & its prospects in this country, briefly to review its history for the last 1/2 Century - since the religious opinions of a nation are rarely ever suddenly changed. "Time is here the greatest "innovator."

About the time aera of our revolution infidelity began to prevail very extensively & in a few years the poison was generally diffused thro' the most intelligent part of society - In producing this result the French Nation may be considered as having exerted the greatest direct immediate influence. The ~~generous aid they afforded~~ arms they outstretched for our aid in the dark & troubled hour of our the struggle for national existence invested their opinions with a power not intrinsically their own. The writings of Voltaire - Rosseau - Volney & the whole tribe of French Encyclopedists exerted a tremendous influence upon the intellectual men of that day; while hatred to the English, joined with a blind admiration of French manners threatened to change the whole face of society & introduce among us the corruption of the Court of Louis the 16th.

The nation were mad after the French - Patrick Henry in a letter to Archibald Blair, at the close of the last century, thus expresses his solicitude on this subject - "Whilst I see the dangers that threaten us from her intrigues & her arms I am not so much alarmed as at the apprehension of her destroying the great pillars of Gov^t & of social life; I mean virtue, morality & religion - This is the armor my friend & this alone that renders us invincible. These are the tactics we should study. - If we lose these we are conquered, fallen indeed. In vain may France show & vaunt her diplomatic skill & brave troops - so long as our manners & principles remain sound, there is no danger. But believing as I do, that these are in danger, that infidelity in its broadest sense, under the name of Philosophy is fast spreading & that under the patronage of French manners & principles, every thing that ought to be dear to man is covertly but successfu assailed, I feel the value of those men among us, who hold out to the world the idea that our continent is to exhibit an originality of character that instead of that imitation & inferiority which the old world have been in the habit of expecting from the new, we shall maintain that high ground on which nature has placed us & that Europe will alike cease to rule us & give us modes of thinking." -

The solicitude which Patrick Henry in common with other good men felt ~~[illegible]~~ in view of the spread of infidelity was not groundless - when our Fathers came upon the stage the great majority of those who influenced & formed the national mind, (the ministry excepted) were deeply imbued with infidel principles. Jeffersons boast that in 50 years the Bible would sink in its authority to ~~the~~ level with the Koran, was in some measure warranted by the wonderful diffusion of those opinions which annihilated that authority, & which he had himself witnessed -

But the french infidelity worked its own cure - The revolution, itself the development of the principles on which it rests, gave it the first death wound in this country - Since the commencement of this century, it has been gradually dying away among the more intelligent part of society. It is no longer fashionable among that class to be professedly infidel in sentiment if it is to be irreligious. We are not now aware of a single collegiate institution, in which infidelity is either directly countenanced or very prevalent - But at the close of the last century It prevailed very extensively in all our colleg~~iate~~es & academies. It lifted its Gorgan head with ~~almost~~ unrebuked boldness in almost every place of instruction poisoning those great fountains of national character. In Yale & Harvard the body of the students were infidels

They were organised into Societies for the purpose of maintaining & diffusing their sentiments; & they even assumed the names of the great infidel Philosophers of Europe, as men under whose banners they were proud to fight. It is needless to remark that an entire revolution has taken place in these & similar institutions - Indeed it is a well known fact, that in the University of Virginia which Jefferson in a sense founded & from which he hoped to exclude the religion of Jesus, a minister of that very religion is maintained at the joint expense of the faculty & students. I

In rolling back the waves of French Infidelity linked as it was with Jacobinism, the writings of Dwight - Hall - Watson - Burke & others did much; but it is not to be concealed that the general influence of the ministry & preeminently of the Presbyterian ministry, animated it may be roused to action by the writings of those excellent men - was most powerfully efficacious. A pure - intelligent ministry ever will be an impassable barrier, rising up across the course track of Infidelity - limiting its conquests & annihilating its power - While however we may justly congratulate ourselves on the advance of truth, during this century, it is still true, that there is among us a class of men, comparatively illiterate, whose only badge of distinction is the sympathy they feel with the spirit & principles of Thomas Paine - Men of this character abound in all our cities & large manufacturing towns. They are chiefly Englishmen, with not a few native Americans. It is an evil incidental to all populous places, that while they afford great facilities for the practise of vice, they also increase the amount of temptation. But when vice has once successfully assailed the outworks, the way is clear for Infidelity to enter the citadel. It is the only pillow on which a guilty conscience can snatch even an unquiet repose. In this way our native youth have in many instances been ~~to~~ driven to embrace infidelity. Their number however is small compared with the swarms of imported infidels hived in England & allured hither by the prospect of a lucrative employment -

For it is a singular fact that while the influence of Thomas Paine's writings has not been very great upon our native population; in England it has wrought incalculable mischief - The great mass of our vulgar infidels were made so under the British monarchy - They are principally artisans skillful ~~in their trade~~, & occasionally intelligent: but malignant - bold & heaven daring - Fanny Drummond - ~~[illegible]~~ Buckland

& Owen are their leaders & the character of the
soldiers may be correctly estimated by that of
the generals — Men of this stamp prevail
most in the northern & middle section of ~~the~~
Country — we have not been able fully to ascertain
~~the~~ to what extent they are organised into regular societies
They have 3 associations in New York — one in
Boston — Providence & Wilmington, Delaware, —
Besides these regularly organised & public societies
It is supposed, believed, altho our information is not exact.
that there are secret clubs in Lowell — Paterson — Newark
& many other large towns — The number of these
associations is constantly varying from the
inherent difficulty with which they are kept
together — Drunkenness — Bankruptcy — a revival of
religion will often bring to the dust in a few
months the proudest fabric — It may not be
uninteresting, nor unprofitable to relate the histo
of one of these associations (in one of the large towns
of this State) An Old club had been partially broken
up by the combined impression of the death bed
confessions & a sermon delivered at the funeral of
a leading infidel. Out of its ruins & under the
impulse of a dozen lectures from Fanny Wright,
a new society sprang at once into vigorous existence
locks fully grown
& with its full grown Locks threatened to pull down
the pillars both of the temple of Dagon & of Jesus X —
For a time all went smoothly as a marriage bell

- Their Sabbath discussions were paraded before the public in one of the weekly newspapers. Books were gathered, as the foundation of an infidel library & an infidel sabbath School was about to be established for the more perfect induction of the young into the mysteries of Deism. But mark the sequel - In a few months several of their most respectable members, for some unknown reason suddenly forsook the society In the course of ~~the~~ 2 or 3 years - several died sots - A no became bankrupt & left the place 3 as well as I can now recollect committed suicide - The association fell to pieces & of the few original members who still remain in the place the majority are striding to the drunkards house - Such has been & such it is confidently predicted will be the fate of many of these associations

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In New England, with the exception of a very few large towns, whatever infidelity there exists, is very generally masked under the garb of Universalism, I will not say of Unitarianism. The people understand Christianity too well, to strip the bible of its sacredness Divinity - They have not yet descended low enough to do it - But Universalism is a fit standard under which all the vice & profligacy of the town may rally - In this way a

Universalist Church drains off, at least for a tim into itself, all the elements of corruption. It is a religion in form, disburdening the guilty conscience of its load, without the least spark of vitality - & this is just the religion for a secret infidel - The proportion of this class to the whole population is not probably a 1/10. It has apparently reached its limit & unless recruited from foreign ignorance & vice, or ~~unless~~ employed by ~~b~~ heaven as the scourge of a guilty land, it must trave back into the darkness & oblivion of its origin -

"In Lowell it is said there are three hundred' avowed infidels, who for obvious reasons have never formed themselves into an associatio - In Boston there is a large congregation of Atheists of rather Pantheists marshalled & lead on by Kneeland & co." The Old Federal Street theatr has been prepared & dedicated as a temple of reason; On the Sabbath the doors of this templ are thrown open & after the bell has ceased tolling the services commence: First the minister rise & invites the attention of the congregation to the singing of hymn, which he reads - The band or choir strikes up a ~~waltz~~ waltz or some quick tune, the singers rise & sing, perhaps this hymn. "Gather your roses while you may, Old time is ever flying; And that same flower which shines to da o morrow may be dying" &c - After this the minister eads a portion of the Bible of Reason - He then ives out another hymn or song - for their hymn ook contains both & the singers strike up - perhaps the following = Away with melancholy - nor oleful changes ring, On life & human folly, But merrily - merrily sing. so gay &c. - Then the minister rises & commences his sermon - the nature of which may be judged of by the nature of the sources of the texts - The general tenor is to ridicule the christian religion - to persuade the congregation that there is no God - no future state & no soul; in short to preach the doctrines of the French infidels, not by fair argument & from established premises but by bold assertion - impudent assumpti unblushing falsehood - coarse ridicule & profane jests. After the sermon comes another hymn & then the congregation is dismissed with the announcement that the weekly ball will be held in this place on wednesday evening" The society of Tammany hall in New York conduct their exercises on the sabbath with less formality & greater show of liberality - They not unfrequently throw down the gauntlet, challenging any person present to defend Christianity. But this is a mere bravado; He who accepts the challenge is sure to be overthrown by that unanswerable argument - a universal hiss

One one occasion indeed they actually presented a distinguished lawyer from the South, who had accepted their challenge, before the police court, as a disturber of the peace

It is impossible to estimate with any degree of accuracy the no of avowed infidels in New York & Boston. A few years ago when Fanny Wright was in the zenith of her popularity, she boasted that there were 20,000 individuals in the city of New York alone, who had embraced her sentiments. If the number is confined only to those who are open-professed infidels it is most probably too large; but if the Universalists & Nothingarians are included it falls far short of the truth.

In the valley of the Mississipi we find a greater no of infidels in proportion to the no of inhabitants than in any other part of the union. Dr Cooper of South Carolina goes so far as to assert that 1/2 of the population are infidels - an opinion by the way, which requires something more than his word to substantiate it - The principles & writings of Owen have been industriously circulated, in consequence of which, there are Societies of infidels in several of the large towns - But the character of these men differs ~~wholly~~ radically from that of ~~that of~~ the English infide many of them are the descendants of pious ancestors natives of the Eastern section of our Country, upon whose memory they cherish with enthusiasm. - Their infidelity has resulted mainly from a destitution of religious instruction, joined with an activity of mind that breaks through the shackles of a merely traditionary religion, & is skeptical in reference to all opinions which do not seem to be founded on the broad basis of reason & argument - They have not the dogged & sullen character of those, who surrounded from infancy with the blaze of Christianity, must sear conscience by a course of licentiousness or by the subtilties & refinements of a sophistry ~~logic~~ ripe from the pit, before they become entirely insensible to the influence of truth. The very openness & fervidness warmth of feeling which disdains the panoply of a mysterious reserve, while it may at times ripen into violence - breaking over the barriers of decency & right, at the same time lay their own bosoms bare to the well directed arrow of truth - And if the colleges - academies & schools which are now springing up among them, are intrusted to the charge of those who fear God, we feel no solicitude for the event - The west, with its vast treasure of undeveloped energy will yet exert an influence in favour of the cross which may shake the world -

The state of infidelity at the South is different in different sections according to the influences to which they have been individually subjected. It cannot be doubted that among the ~~[illegible]~~ intelligent natives there is more open infidelity than at the North, while in consequence of the absence in a great degree of imported infidelity, there is less in the whole community - In Virginia infidelity has long been losing ground until there are very few of its intelligent population who openly uphold it. Their Anaks are dead - Jefferson & the strong minds who with him attempted to sap the foundation of Christianity, are powerless in the grave; while an able & evangelical Ministry has shed a light upon their descendants, that has dissolved the baseless structure, erected in the place of the christian temple - But in South Carolina, the truth has not shone so bright & powerful; while the influence of some of their leading men, especially of Dr Cooper for a time the president of the State University has been eminently deleterious - were we to credit his assertions 1/2 of the male population of the state are avowed infidels - But we have some reason to consider this opinion as an exaggeration. Still with all due allowance for the partiality of the censor, the facts are sufficiently appalling - It is a matter of sincere rejoicing that Dr Cooper, an English Infidel of the Voltaire school in religion & a Jacobin in politics, is no no longer at the head of an institution which cannot fail to exert a moulding influence upon the *next generation* –

Here is another distinct class of men springing up in the midst of us, from whom our country may have much to fear. They are the sons of Romanist Catholic Emigrants Too much enlightened, by their education in a country where every movement of the government supposes the intelligence of the people & calls ~~all~~ that intelligence into action exercise – not to see through the flimsy veil which the Priesthood throws over the hideous features deformity of their system, & yet too much swayed by prejudice to discover truth in any ~~their~~ opposing religion, they drive off headlong into the night & frost of infidelity. And altho the lingering power of early prejudices & association may hold *them* back from an open renunciation of their fathers faith, yet their *children* will easily loose themselves from such bonds –

Facts with which we are familiar substantiate these ~~facts~~ observations –

The press is an instrument of too much power, not to be employed by infidels in diffusing their sentiments" The Boston Investigator & the Free Enquirer of New York each throw off 2000 impressions weekly. The Comet another infidel paper has an extensive circulation & an Atheistical press at Wilmington Delaware circulates 1.000 copies. Besides these, there are immense editions of Atheistical works printed at New York & Boston & sold exceedingly cheap - They are even stereotyped & in some instances great pains have been taken to distribute them gratuitously through the country".

Aside from these barefaced attempts to propagate infidelity, the Political & literary press has in not a few instances, covertly & on that account more successfully assailed all that is sacred & excellent - In this way such papers as the New York Courier & Enquirer & the Daily Herald have done more to diminish the respect of intelligent men for religion & its ordinances, than all the avowed infidel presses combined - An assasin in the garb of friendship who can resist.

The infidel press is not limited in its aims & efforts to the overthrow of religion - an infidels politics & religion are identical - From the platform of religious discussion it opens a side battery against the present constitution of society, with the partially avowed design of effecting alterations in our government which will radically change its character - See the Boston Investagator & the ~~[illegible]~~

political communications of Fanny W. Darusmond

To effect their purposes they are endeavoring to employ the force of discipline, as well as the tactics of a Jesuit - They have been laboring for several years to organise a grand party of Atheists - Deists - agrarians - Semi catholics universalists, under the lead of a few master spirits, who could concentrate its united strength, at once, upon any point they chose to carry - And it is now an acknowledged fact that this party, imperfectly organised & unable when standing by itself to effect much, by throwing itself into one or the other of the equally balanced sides of the political scales, has already materially affected the character of our Govt -

In the opinions of our Infidels there is every shade of variety, from the grossest Atheism up to the im partial perfect inspiration of the Bible Scripture. But in Boston - Wilmington & indeed generally through the country, the oldfashioned Deists are in many instances running out their principles into blank Atheism. It cannot be denied that among that party. Atheism or Spinozism Pantheism is gaining ground, while Tom Paine is becoming unsavoury & heretical, in consequence of his excessive superstition & piety -

In closing this hasty & imperfect sketch of the state of Infidelity in our country, we must be permitted to express our gratitude to God, that its energies have been crippled & its arm broken - what has it gained within the last 30 years? It has been recruited from the vice & profligacy of our cities - from the hordes of emigrants which the old world has disgorged upon our shores - & from those who have been deprived of that early religious instruction which fortifies against its influence -

what has it lost? not the great mass of the people, for they never were infidel; but it has lost public confidence. It has lost the intelligence of the country - It has lost the colleges - academies & schools & It has lost that ~~tremendous~~ dreadful moral power which from the floor of Congress - the state house - the bench & the hall of science, once shook the American church with the heavings of an earthquake - It has lost the fascinating eloquence - the splendid wit - the subtle logic of the court of Louis 16th. The visions of glory & happiness which its untried principles - untried independently of all other influences, as the sole foundation of political & civil prosperity - held forth, have (vanish ~~& given place~~ before the substantial miseries of the guillotine & the blood graves of its victims. Forsaken in a degree by Philosophy, it has descended into the sties of human corruption ~~& rejoices~~ there to triumph over the vilest specimens of humanity. -

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A few remarks on the state of infidelity in ~~those~~ prominent nations of christendom, will conclude this report -

In Scotland there is very little open infidelity. Many of their leading men are Unitarian in sentiment - The Edinborough Review is more decidedly favourable to christianity than it was under the conduct of Lord Jeffries. The peasantry of Scotland, it is said, are fast degenerating, not in consequence of the spread of infidelity but of intemperance -

In England the open infidelity is chiefly confined to the lower classes, among whom it has made a most lamentable progress: as far we can ascertain, there re no organised societies similar to those in this country; In London there are several infidel bookstores, which are constantly issuing Atheistical & Deistic works. They have recently published an atheistical containing the sentiments of Mirabeau, which is doing great mischief. ~~It has been answered by~~ Mr Godwin has attempted a refutation of its principles - The ublications of these men, are even shipped to India in order to forestall the missionary. Mr Duff, remarked in a speech delivered before the genl assembly of Scot- hat night after night on the banks of the Ganges was he obliged to combat the arguments of Hume -Voltaire & Gibbon -

In France Infidelity is losing ground - ~~which~~ The great men are indeed generally infidels; But the people tired of the lifeless principles by which they have for a long time been agitated ather than governed. are ready to embrace even cast ff Romanism - Protestantism & Romanism are both aining on Infidelity - ~~but~~ The moral power of the court of Rome is now greater than it has een, at any previous time for the last 8 years -

In Germany Evangelical Sentiments are rapidly dvancing - The rationalists or that class who place the Bible on a level with the works of Homer ~~Iliad~~ Herodotus ~~& Livy~~ & that Middle class who seem to believe in a partial nspiration of scripture, subject to their decisions, are ~~about~~ both at the point of culmination - The amazing fluctuation of opinion & the rapidity with which system has succeeded ystem, among these philosophers, tend powerfull to make men Pyrrhonists or christians; —